

Praying for the Culprit:

How Amish Children's Literature Prepares Readers to Forgive Evildoers

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1. Introduction

On October 2, 2006, Charles Carl Roberts IV, a local milk delivery man, barricaded himself in a one-classroom Amish school in the state of Pennsylvania, USA, and started shooting Amish school pupils. Five school girls died and five others were seriously injured before the culprit committed suicide. This incident came to be known as “West Nickel Mines School Shooting.” (Nickel Mines Shooting, thereafter)

American media and public were surprised when Amish people swiftly forgave the culprit, a non-Amish man, and even prayed for him and his family. The authors of *Amish Grace* (2007), a book about the incident and the forgiveness of Amish people written by scholars of the Amish, explain that even if the Amish people never anticipated such a tragedy, they are uncommonly prepared to respond to it with graciousness, forbearance, and love. Their argument is that there is a religious, cultural, and communal mechanism that prepare Amish people for such a tragedy.

Researchers interviewed Amish people, examined the letters of Amish people in communal newsletters, and looked into other Amish materials such as collective regulation called *Ordnung*, *Declaration of faith*, and *Martyrs Mirror*; a collection of stories about religious martyrs, in order to clarify how such forgiveness and grace became possible. However, no research has been conducted on written materials directly addressed to children, namely children's literature or school textbooks, even

though the gun was targeted at them, and how they behaved at the scene as well as after the incident was examined by media and researchers carefully.

This paper examines children's literature written mainly for Amish children, and commercial Amish-themed books written mainly for non-Amish children, from the time around the Nickel Mines shooting. I would like to compare the two writings, and see if children's literature for Amish children demonstrates a trait to prepare children for tragedy such as Nickel Mines shooting.

The materials used are Children's Section stories of a family magazine, *Family Life*, two children's book series, namely, *Lizzie* series, and *Rachel Yoder* series. *Family Life* is a monthly family and community magazine in English published by Pathway Publishers, Ontario. According to Stephen Scott, this magazine is subscribed by over 85% of Amish families. (Other readers include Mennonite families.) The magazine has about 40 pages per issue, and 50% of its content are stories, 35% for adults, and 12.5% for Children. Children's Section (average 4.8 pages/issue, 4 items) contains original stories, poems, old sayings, Bible extracts, games and puzzles. For this paper, I have examined 56 stories from January 2006 to October 2007 issues of *Family Life*. *Lizzie* series (2003~2008) is a set of seven books by an Amish writer, Linda Byler, depicting a life of an Amish girl from the age of five to her married years. Every volume is about 250 to 300 pages. *Rachel Yoder* series (2006-2009) is a set of eight books by a non-Amish writer Wonda Brunstetter, each story is about 130 to 150 pages long, and each episode tells a story in the life of an Amish school-age girl.

2. Background

2.1 Amish People

Amish people are Anabaptist Christian who live in the United States and Canada, mainly in the states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Ontario. They have emigrated from Switzerland and its neighboring areas, to avoid religious persecution.

The Amish have a unique lifestyle that has not changed greatly over the last 200 years. For instance, they do not own a private telephone or a car, and they do not use mains electricity or electric gadgets. What makes their lifestyle particularly unique is the fact that Amish people live in highly developed countries. They live in close proximity to ordinary North American people whose lives are increasingly dependent on cars, mobile phones, personal computers, TVs, and other electric gadgets. Amish people are aware of the existence of such modern tools, but they control the flow of information and goods by deciding what to introduce into their society, based on their religious belief. (Kraybill, 2001; Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, 2013; Kraybill, Nolt, Weaver-Zercher, 2010)

2.2 Amish in American Imagination

As Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher have pointed out (2007), Nickel Mines shooting was a blow to American general public, because if such a dreadful thing can happen to a peaceful rural Amish school, anything can happen anywhere in America. It meant a death of safe haven in American imagination.

One of the ways in which the safe haven has been constructed in American imagination is through Amish-themed children's literature. Amish-themed children's books have been around for nearly 80 years. The first Amish-themed picture book, *Henner's Lydia*, was written by Margerite De Angeli, and published in 1936. In 1944, the same author won the Carnegie medal for another Amish-themed picture book, *Yoni the Wondernose*. Since then, Amish-themed books became widely available at North American school libraries, and children's book market. They depict rural and idyllic agricultural lifestyle of horse-drawn buggies, feeding farm animals, picking strawberries and eggs in the garden, baking cookies and preparing jams, pickles, etc.

Amish-themed books have been popular in the U.S. According to historian David Weaver-Zelcher, Amish-themed books had enjoyed "a warm reception from non-Amish consumers. [In their eyes, they] depicted America at its mythic best: full of innocence, blessed by God, and rippling with strength." (Weaver-Zercher, 2001,

p.87) Amish-themed books contributed to Amish tourism, where ordinary middle-American families would visit “Amish Land” to see living Amish people. (D.Weaver-Zercher, 2001)

Such reception has been brought about by the changes that occurred in American society. David Luthy (1994) points out that Amish-themed stories and products entered American imagination as the country was beginning to be industrialized. The lifestyle of ordinary Americans and that of Amish household started to diverge in 1940s, when industrialization has introduced various factory-made products into households. The divergence has brought about the commercialization of Amish world, as increasingly rare traditional lifestyle of Amish people and their handmade products gained commercial value. With the development in public and private transport system, tourists started to flock to “Amish Land” such as Lancaster County in the state of Pennsylvania.

Amish-themed children’s books such as *Henner’s Lydia* and *Little Amish Schoolhouse* (1939) are the forerunner of the Amish trend, as the media interests in Amish people and their lifestyles began in earnest in 1940s. (Weaver-Zercher, 2001) Given the middle-America’s desire to hold and consume vanishing rustic, rural life, it is no wonder that the force of Amish-themed children’s books fall “on the side of a generic ‘American’ past that was beautiful, bountiful, and innocent.”(ibid.)

2.3 Stories about Amish Children and Stories for Amish Children

Most of the Amish-themed children’s books are written by non-Amish writers. The nostalgic and idyllic depiction of Amish life written by the non-Amish authors are somewhat different from stories Amish children read or have been read. For instance, the former hardly include horrific and tragic events that end with deaths. However, in the nurturing of Amish children’s identity and their historical imagination, religious persecution and martyrdom are real and important occurrences as children are regularly read the stories of martyrs from a book called *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christian* (known simply

as *Martyrs Mirror* at Amish home and school). *Martyrs Mirror* is a book first published in 1660, and it is still constantly republished and reprinted as it is a popular gift for newly-wed Amish couples. (Kraybill, Nolt, Weaver-Zercher, 2007) It has gruesome illustrations of torture and execution as well as descriptions of horrific events imposed on Amish martyr, and how they accepted such fate without resistance, and often even asking God forgiveness for the evil deeds of the prosecutors as they inflict pain on them. Amish people recall watching the illustrations and listening to the stories told by their parents as a child. Indeed it is a very different picture book to that of idyllic Amish-themed books.

2.4 Amish Romance and Amish-themed Children's Literature

The discrepancy between outsiders' view of Amish and Amish people's view of their origin and identity may have become greater recently. This is because Amish characters became popular literary figures in North American Romance novels. As Valery Weaver-Zelcher (2013) observes, the romance novels featuring bonnet-clad traditional Amish women, became "hot" in literary market. The genre of Amish Romance gained its momentum after the Nickel Mines School shooting of October, 2006. Such increase in public interest and publishing of Amish-themed books resemble sudden interests in the Amish after the public school dispute in 1937, when the media exposure concerning Amish refusal to send children to state schools contributed to the Amish-related sales.

Once the genre of Amish Romance has been established, the best-seller authors of the genre have started to write Amish-themed children's books. So now we have Amish-themed children's literature, such as *Rachel Yoder* series and *Double Trouble* series (2012~) written by Wanda Brunstetter, and *Lilly Lapp* series (2012~) written by Mary Ann Kinsinger and Suzanne Woods Fisher. There is also a series by the only Amish writer Linda Byler, *Buggy Spoke* (or *Lizzie*) series.

3. Stories for Amish Children

3.1 Language of *Family Life* Magazine

Family Life, the family magazine I will look at in this paper, is written in English. The choice of language used in the magazine has an implication for the nature and scope of the magazine. Amish people use several different languages according to the purpose of communication. (Meyers and Nolt, 2005) In daily lives, they use Pennsylvania Dutch among themselves, which is a language similar to Swiss German. They use German as religious language, for reading and reciting Bible, for example. English is learned at school enabling Amish people to communicate with other non-Amish American people whom they call “English”. English is the language of school and formal instruction as well as social transactions with non-Amish outsiders. Thus, it can be argued that the magazine contents could be categorized as writings of didactic nature, informing and instructing people in a manner similar to school textbooks. One can suppose that the subject expressed in English language occupies a space which is not as intimate as Pennsylvania Dutch nor as formal or religious as German. It is situated in the space of instruction and social interaction, where negotiation between one’s intimate and personal emotion, and righteous and divine ordinance, can be experienced repeatedly as a process rather than a state of affairs. Of course, the use of English may also be determined by the fact that the magazine also has non-Amish (mainly Mennonite) readers, and that spelling of Pennsylvania Dutch have not been set, as it has many variations like Swiss German. However, one can discern the didactic nature of Children’s Section stories, by looking at their contents. In this paper, I would like to focus on themes and story-lines.

3.2 Didactic Themes of *Family Life* Stories

All 50 stories in Children’s Corner of *Family Life* examined had a didactic content. There are explicit or implicit lessons to be learned from the stories.

However, they are not directly related to Christianity in the way Christian stories such as Bible stories are. In Amish society, religion is not taught at school, as it is the responsibility of parents (Kraybill, 2007) or parents and the church (as observed by Hostetler in 1970s, D.Weaver-Zercher (ed.), 2005). *Family Life* stories seem to follow this pattern: There are few direct references to Christianity or God within the stories. This is another reason why one can argue that *Family Life* stories occupy the space of instruction and social interaction similar to that of a school. Apart from three stories which tell the joy of being hard-working or playing happily with siblings (“Fun in the Snow,” “A Happy Day,” “Neighbor John”) and one story in which an unruly pet causes havoc and is finally taken away (“Good bye, Goofy!”), the rest of the stories deal with shortcomings in children themselves, which they usually learn to mend in the course of an episode.

The depicted shortcomings of children fall into the categories of being disobedient to authority (mainly parents) and unthankful of their situations. Child characters within these stories do not obey what parents tell or ask to do, namely, helping house chores or avoiding dangerous deeds. So, for instance, in a story called “Flying Stones,” children do not stop throwing stones even after being warned by a parent. As in the story of “Sarah’s Privilege,” even when child characters do what they are told, they are depicted as being grumpy about having to do chores, or look after their younger siblings or frail older people. They are also unhappy about their “misfortune” and sometimes become jealous of others who they regard as more fortunate. They sometimes wish ill of such “fortunate” people. In the case of Stephen in “Stephen’s Broken Leg,” he is bitter about breaking his leg, and wishes others to suffer the same misfortunes like himself.

Such shortcomings of the main characters are usually punished by the end of the stories. So the typical story line of *Family Life* children’s stories fall into the following pattern: Naughty, unhappy, or unthankful children at the beginning of an episode behave badly and ignore or forget parents’ warning or order, often more than once. As a consequence, they encounter injuries such as broken legs (e.g. “Sarah’s

Privilege”), burns or cuts (e.g. “Flying Rocks”), or receive punishment such as corporal punishment (e.g. “A Lesson from Puppy”), or withdrawal of treats such as nice food. (e.g. “Strawberry Milkshake”) In this way, disobedient children suffer the consequence of their shortcomings.

Interestingly, there is hardly any description of emotional disturbances when child characters experience punishments or bad consequences. I will address this aspect later in section 3.7. The stories of disobedient and unthankful children ends with the main characters trying or resolving to be more obedient, or more satisfied and thankful of their lives.

Some of the objectives of these stories can be teaching and entertaining children as well as giving reassurance to them so that they can see there are other children who are not perfect, who are naughty and have bad experiences, but who also go through the process of having their shortcomings forgiven.

Not only are there stories of naughty children as main characters, but there are also descriptions of other characters with shortcomings. So, grumpy or unhappy main characters are often given opportunities to listen to stories told by older people. For example, their parents, grand-parents, teachers, or older cousins talk to them about similar problems they experienced themselves (e.g. “When Mom Was a Little Girl”), or they report of other people in difficult situations. (e.g. “Life is Not Fair”)

The fact that similar stories of disobedience and naughtiness are repeated month after month in the magazine shows the necessity of such lessons to be told often, as well as the difficulty of learning the lessons by reading a few episodes.

The fallible nature of the child characters may also be popular and entertaining for child readers. There are some self-referential stories, in which *Family Life* magazine are shown as a source of pleasure rather than just lessons. For example, Child characters are read the *Family Life* stories as a treat after chores. There are also stories in which child characters are so keen to read *Family Life* stories that they do not want to do chores. There is even a story in which a child character uses the content of the *Family Life* poem to cheat doing homework. (“A Mother’s Day

Poem”) Month after month, there are stories in which the characters are engaged in doing dangerous or exciting things, as well as mean or naughty things. *Family Life* stories are not just meant to give serious lessons, but also fun and pleasure.

3.3 Descriptions of Adults as Role-models

In *Family Life* stories, it is not just child characters who go through difficult period. As I have mentioned above, parents and teachers occasionally show how weak they once were by telling their experiences of having to overcome bad habits or disobediences. For instance, in a story titled “Easy to Grow”, 13 year old boy has a habit of using a bad language, but his teacher does not punish him. Rather than punishing, the teacher tells him a story of her struggle to mend her way. Realizing that the teacher understands his problem, and is willing to share her experience of struggle with him, makes the boy more willing to make efforts even though it is hard for him. Thus, readers can read not only a child character having shortcomings, but also read how adult role-models have struggled to be good themselves.

Inclusion of imperfect adults are all the more striking as parents and teachers are usually depicted as right and just people who are kind and never lose emotional control. Even when child characters are disobedient, they just look “sternly” at bad child characters or look “sad” when child characters behave badly. (e.g. “Keeping Track of Time”) There is no description of them uttering angry language. Most of the time, they smile kindly, or show concern even when child characters behave badly. Such depictions of controlled emotions can also be seen in the description of mother in *Lizzie* series by Linda Byler.

From the point of view of forgiveness, the stories show that adults can forgive naughty children, as they themselves experienced and understand the way children behave. In a way, adults act as role-models to children not just because they are “good”, but because they show how naughty children can grow into a fine and respectable adult.

3.4 Fixed Characters in *Rachel Yoder Series*

However, such kindly adults above are in contrast with the description of the parents in *Rachel Yoder series*. For instance, Rachel's mother sometimes "glares" at children, "groans" because they make mess, and often clicks her tongue in an irritated manner. They do not reveal their shortcomings or weakness to children, rather, they show their immaturity in their inability to control their emotions and reveal irritation to their children. In *Rachel Yoder series*, parents are figures of sometimes selfish authority, who do not have similarities with child characters.

Other characters are also more fixed and predictable in *Rachel Yoder stories*. Even a character like Orlie, the boy who teases and upsets Rachel but surprises her by confessing his fondness of her at the end of the story, has a fixed nature, because his intention is made transparent to readers early in the story.

3.5 Multiple Facets and Continuity of Human Nature in *Family Life Stories*

In *Family Life stories*, characters are not as fixed as *Rachel Yoder series* even though the stories are much shorter, generally only a few pages long. Characters usually change within an episode. There is even a story that depicts characters descending from having small bad habits such as loitering and lacking promptness to committing big sins, as well as characters progressing from committing big sins to reaching salvation.

In "Down the Path of Disobedience," a grand-father tells a disobedient boy called Leroy a story about two men, one "English" and one Amish. Both men have gone down the road of disobedience till the former ended up in prison for armed bank robbery, and the latter became excommunicated from Amish church. Leroy thinks that these men are different from each other because the Amish man did not end up in jail. However, the grand-father told him that there is not much difference between the two in the way they both started being disobedient in childhood, and were in bondage to their sinful nature before they reached manhood. However, the

English man started reading Bible in prison, and “by the time he served the time, he grasped the message of salvation and turned to God.” (August/September, 2006, p.29) The story is the space in which such transformation of characters can happen.

The fact that there are different sides and characters within the same human being is an important theme in *Family Life* stories. There are also stories in which the main child characters learn to understand and forgive proud or unpleasant persons, and find out that they have admirable traits or abilities. (e.g. “Sharon and the Scrapbook”) There are also stories in which grand-mother suffering from senile dementia is cared kindly and remembered fondly in her former glory. (e.g. “Caring for Grandma”) Combined with recurrent stories of fallible children, these stories see shortcomings and imperfectness of others as something worth forgiving and praying for, because everyone has the possibility of being fallible or unable to help themselves (especially when they are in deprived or difficult situations) as well as being good or useful to others.

3.6 Forgiveness and Gospel

According to Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher (2007), the Amish emphasizes the Gospel of Matthew 6:14-15:

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

For the Amish people, their forgiving should come before God’s forgiveness of them as E.Worthington (1998) has pointed out, empathy and humility (an ability to understand the offender and fallible nature of human being including oneself) are key to forgiveness. In order to achieve their part of forgiveness, viewing all human beings as someone who share certain aspect of themselves (in terms of weakness and struggle) will be an effective preparation.

In order to come to terms with evil deeds and reach forgiveness, characters in *Family Life* stories display several different traits. It is useful to look at three responses to the reality of evil or hardship by Christians (Kraybeill, Nolt, Weaver-Zercher, 2007) in order to understand and recognize the different traits, and see if they can be observed in the stories.

The first concept of evilness is that God allows evil or difficult things to happen, and we as humans should submit to His will. In issues after Nickel Mines Shooting, there are several stories that deal with the theme of sudden deaths. In November 2006 issue, there is a story within a story of grumpy daughter about a boy whose mother dies doing the chores he refused to do. ("A Lesson for Laura") In this episode, the boy feels so guilty and sad, although the mother of the story tells that even if something happens, it is not the fault of the child, but God's will. Half a year later, in April 2007 issue, there is a story of a child whose best friend had been hit by a truck and died suddenly. ("When Samuel's Friend Went to Heaven") In this episode, father tells the child that it was God's will for his best friend to die, even though they do not understand why he should die.

A Message underlying these stories are the idea that however awful a tragedy one experiences, whatever happens should be good for humans because God makes no mistake. Here, another of Christian attitude commonly observed among Amish is mentioned: Namely, human will never fully understand why bad things happen under God's watch, but as it is said in Lord's prayer, it is important for Christian to accept the phrase, "Thy will be done". It is even mentioned in above story that a good thing came out of the death, because they all think of heaven and God much more. This combines above two attitudes, namely, believing in God's intentions for greater good, and admitting no comprehension of God's plan.

As any tragedy can be willed by God, the fact that culprits act on evil intent becomes not so important in these stories. Misfortunes just happens, and even though bad consequences are sometimes caused by disobedience or carelessness, there are no descriptions of willed bad intentions, so readers of these stories do not

have to ponder about evil people or deeds. Even in a story entitled “Life is not Fair,” that depicts father being sent to a labor camp and the rest of the family becoming refugees, there is only one sentence accusing the culprit, “Why would people want to destroy all this good land?” To be sure, there are characters who does have dark thoughts such as Stephen in “Stephen’s Broken Leg”, who broke his legs and wishes his classmate to be in his situation instead of himself. However, words of his father make him think differently:

We don’t know why this happened. I don’t like to say that God planned it, but we know He allowed it to happen. We don’t know why, but that is not for us to question. I believe God has a purpose in this, and He wants us to learn from it. (February 2006, p.26)

Above quotation reveals another concept of evil employed by Christian, namely, God does not plan things but allow certain bad things to happen in his knowledge for some greater long-term good which humans cannot perceive. So in *Family Life* stories, when misfortune happens, the characters try and learn from it even if they are affected by the occurrences at first.

In *Family Life* stories for children, there are not many violent or tragic incidents probably because they have *Martyrs Mirror* for such things. However, as I have mentioned above, there are several stories with tragic and violent occurrences after the Nickel Mines shooting, such as “Flying Rock”, and “When Samuel’s Friend Went to Heaven.” This is in contrast with stories of a non-Amish writer, Wonda Brunsttet which continue to show pretty pictures of peaceful Amish life even after the tragedy.

“Flying Rock” is one of the episodes where bad things can happen even though not intended by those who commit the deed. It is a story about two girls throwing stones for fun. Despite mother’s warning, they disobeyed mother’s words and threw stones, one of which hits one of the girls, causing gushing blood from her forehead.

In this episode, these children are generally good, they help their mother, and they didn't have any evil intention when they threw stones. They were just having fun. So, an awful thing can happen even though neither child planned for it. It is true that their mother warned against throwing stones, but they had the freedom to disobey, and they did not foresee the possibility of a bad consequence. The experience actually give them the opportunity to learn from it. In the story, the wound caused by the stone was not too serious, so the girl survives, and mother says that the scar will actually remind girls of the disobedience, and stop them being bad, so it is good to have the scar.

3.7 Punishment and Misfortune as Mechanical Consequences of Shortcomings

The description of corporal punishment in these stories are rather similar to the bad consequences child character suffer above. Children are “paddled” by parents sometimes, but at such times parents are never emotionally angry or utter angry words. They execute punishment as if it is some mechanical transaction they are made to do to follow a simple rule of cause and effect. There is no description of how the child felt physically or how the child or parents felt emotionally. Just a simple one sentence like, “so mother punished her.”

The descriptions of punishments are different between *Family Life* stories and *Lizzie* stories or *Rachel Yoder* stories. In the latter, there are plenty description about how the child character fears about the punishment, how it hurts, and how miserable or shameful the characters felt afterwards. In *Family Life* stories, emotions are expressed before the punishment, when child characters feel angry, sad, jealous, or frustrated against their initial misfortunes of having to do house chores or warned against their sloppiness or illicit enjoyment. In the course of the story, however, such feelings are dissolved as they come to understand that bad consequences follow certain deeds, punishments do not mean the denial of their personalities, and bad consequences can be blessings in disguise as they can learn from them. Stories

supply the space in which child readers experience the process of negotiating personal feelings to accommodate God's big picture, and they come to accept their situations or learn the good and bad consequences according to their deeds.

In the rare case of misfortune such as the death of loved ones, characters do suffer the pain of such loss even though they submit themselves to God's will. Thus, the mother of the boy in "When Samuel's Friend Went to Heaven" says that it is OK to cry and acknowledge how much one misses deceased person. Nevertheless, there are ample stories in which parents tell their children the need to smile even if they do not feel like it, or accept that life is not fair and it is best to just get on with it as cheerfully as one can.

So, *Family Life* stories are not for making readers question the status quo. The *Family Life* story authors may even be trying to resolve the fact that loving parents do inflict pain on their children if it is deemed necessary in order to exemplify the order of cause and effect, because such a perspective is necessary if readers need to resolve their initial personal and emotional discomforts with God's will which manifests itself as misfortunes or bad consequences.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined *Family Life* stories written for mainly Amish readers to see if there are certain function to prepare children to accept and respond to tragic situation such as that of West Nickel Mines School Shooting tragedy. I have also used Amish-themed children's literature aimed at mainly non-Amish readers, in order to highlight the characteristics of *Family Life* stories. There are some stories that directly quote Bible particularly Mathew and Psalm, but the majority of *Family Life* stories uses children with shortcomings who try, fail, and try again in becoming obedient to parents as well as accepting what God has stored for them. Seeing themselves, their role models, and fallen people as all fallible, one can say that these stories prepare Amish children to forgive those who trespass them, and by depicting

any misfortune as something devoid of evil intentions but rather God's will which to human being seems like mysterious accident, Amish readers of *Family Life* stories may be prepared to face a terrible tragedy such as that of West Nickel Mines School Shooting.

This paper looked mainly at the story lines of *Family Life* stories. One area which I could not include in my argument is the way child characters transform from someone with shortcomings to someone who can accept God's will. A more detailed examination of the way language is used to depict the transformation would be necessary in order to clarify above point.

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罪人への祈り：

アーミッシュ児童文学はどのように読者を赦しへと誘うか

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要約

2006 年 10 月に合衆国ペンシルバニア州にあるアーミッシュの学校でおきた乱射事件（ニッケルマイン事件）では、少女 5 名が死亡し、そのほかに 5 名が重症を負ったにもかかわらず、この子どもたちの親を含むアーミッシュ・コミュニティーの人々は、ただちに犯人とその家族を赦すと発表した。このことは、アメリカ内外の多くのメディアを驚かせたが、アーミッシュの人々がこのような行動に出た背景には、彼らの社会がこのような悲劇に対して彼らに心の準備をさせる赦しの文化があることを、北米のアーミッシュ研究家たちは、アーミッシュの人々へのインタビューや彼らの書簡、彼らが読んでいる宗教関係書の分析などから明らかにしている。しかし、これまでに犠牲になった年代の子どもたちを対象とする読み物は研究対象にされてこなかった。小論では、アーミッシュ家庭の 85%が講読している家庭用雑誌、*Family Life* の子ども用読み物のうち、乱射事件前後の 2006 年と 2007 年に掲載されたお話 56 編を分析した。そして、ペンシルバニアダッチ、ドイツ語、英語を使い分けるアーミッシュの人々が、子ども時代から英語読み物の読書体験をとおして、個人の感情と宗教的世界観の折り合いの付け方を毎月繰り返し学習していくことも、悲劇に遭遇した時の心の準備を育むことに寄与しているのではないかと論じた。